[Firebrand Big Read]

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John Wesley, the architect of the Methodist movement, held many theological themes in tension. For example, Wesley held divine grace and human response in conjunction. Further, he was both a high church Anglican and an outdoor field-preaching evangelical. For Wesley, initial salvation included both the relative change of justification and the real change of regeneration. Another significant tension Wesley maintained was between baptism and the new birth. As Wesleyans, we have struggled to understand and preserve the balance between water and the Spirit. Throughout his ministry, Wesley retained both the imperative of baptism *and*

the need to be born again. Wesley did not believe that these two realties were mutually exclusive. Yet some of us today do. I hope to show that Wesley held the sacrament of baptism in conjunction with the experience of the new birth, and we should as well.

The Conjunction: Baptism as Sacramental and Evangelical

Wesley understood baptism as *both* sacramental and evangelical. In order truly to understand Wesley's conjunctive view of baptism, it is necessary to grasp the nature of these two distinctions, and how Wesley attempted to hold them together in a larger soteriological framework that was fashioned to foster holiness. On the one hand, Wesley held a high church, sacramental view of baptism and baptismal regeneration that he inherited from Anglicanism. On the other hand, Wesley, following his Aldersgate experience in 1738, adopted an evangelical perspective that still valued the initiating grace of infant and adult baptism but further insisted on regenerating and sanctifying grace that is solely ministered by the Spirit. In his own case as a youth and in the instances of many around him, he realized that one often sinned away the grace received at infant baptism and subsequently one needed to be born again to continue on the journey of holiness.

Wesley's journal entry for May 24, 1738, gives an account of his Aldersgate experience and a brief overview of the years leading up to the experience. He begins that entry referencing his infant baptism but later recalls falling gradually into outward sin. Here he is obviously interpreting and rethinking his infant baptism in light of his recent conversion experience: "I believe, till I was about ten years old I had not sinned away that 'washing of the Holy Ghost' which was given me in baptism." Wesley's theology and practice of baptism were developed over time. Following Aldersgate, he attempted to hold baptism and the new birth together in tension, but not always without ambiguity. Over time, he put more weight on the transformation of the new birth over the outward sign and even over the incipient regeneration received at infant baptism. Wesley's ultimate goal was holiness. He witnessed in his own life that the transformation that occurs in the new birth is essential if one is to go on to perfection. Nonetheless, throughout his ministry he contended for the proper place of both (baptism and the new birth).

As an Anglican priest, Wesley ministered the sacrament to infant and adult alike as needed in the Georgia mission and throughout the Methodist revival. Wesley considered the practice of infant baptism to be upheld by both scripture and the tradition of the early Church. He understood baptism, specifically infant baptism, as the New Testament circumcision, and cited its practice in the book of Acts and in Christian tradition for the first eighteen hundred years (*Treatise on Baptism*). During his lifetime, Wesley published two pieces that specifically reflected his views on baptism. The first is his *Thoughts Upon Infant-Baptism* (1751, 1780, and 1791), a short work he edited and republished from William Wall's *History of Infant Baptism*. The second work is entitled *A Treatise on Baptism* (1756, 1758), an abridgement of his father Samuel Wesley's *The Pious Communicant Rightly Prepared* (1698). He also included instructions for infant and adult baptism in the *Sunday Service of the Methodists in the United States of America* (1784, 1786). Further, he expounded on the topic in his *Notes,* in many of his sermons, and throughout his written works. Although as a good Anglican Wesley identified baptism as one of the two sacraments and upheld its significance, he did not include baptism in the means of grace listed in the *General Rules*, probably because it was not a repeatable practice like the other means of grace. Reasonably, many early Methodists were already baptized as infants in the institutional church. Nonetheless, Wesley claimed that the sacrament was indeed a means of grace employed by the Spirit to initiate regeneration.

God as Primary Agent and Actor

In the economy of God, the Lord is the divine agent of grace in our experience of salvation. God is also the divine agent who ministers grace through baptism. Regretfully, we tend to forget who is at work in the sacrament. One way or another, some Wesleyans seem to acquire a Baptist theology that stresses *our* work or obedience in baptism. They may even understand baptism as strictly an ordinance that must be obeyed, rather than a sacrament in which God gives grace. Yes, we are commanded to be baptized. But we are not baptizing ourselves. It is the work of God to baptize us into the body of Christ. The scriptures declare that "by one Spirit we are baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13).

The Spirit of God invites us to repent and be baptized. He calls us into *his* covenant through the sacrament of initiation. The Spirit draws us to Christ through prevenient

and convincing grace and transforms us through justifying and sanctifying grace. However, we are not merely passive recipients. We are called to respond with repentance and faith, which are also gifts from God. We love him because he first loved us. The Spirit is the primary agent in salvation. Baptism is the initiating grace that accompanies infant baptism. It is also the outward sign of the inward grace in adult baptism that works alongside conversion. The inward change wrought through the outward sign of baptism is the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit, who is the divine agent of salvation. Wesley states, "This beginning of that vast, inward change, is usually termed, the new birth. Baptism is the outward sign of this inward grace " (*Farther Appeal*). Thus, baptism joins water with the work of the Spirit. In Wesleyan theology the work of regeneration can begin at infant baptism or later in life in conversion, which is marked by adult baptism. From regenerating grace, we move to sanctifying grace. Simply put, for Wesleyans, "[b]aptism is the doorway to the sanctified life" (UMC, *By Water and the Spirit*).

So, let us be clear that the Holy Spirit is the primary actor in baptism, initiating grace. Yes, baptism requires a response of repentance and faith from the infant's sponsors or from the adult in adult baptism. But even our response is fueled by grace. It is all the work of the Spirit. Grace as gift, specifically the giving of God's self, is inextricably linked to, and in places seemingly synonymous with, the agency of the Holy Spirit. Wesley often uses the term "grace" for the "power of the Spirit" that restores humanity to God's image and makes humanity holy that we may love God and others. Theologian Lycurgus Starkey notes, for Wesley, "The Holy Spirit and the grace of God are never separated from one another" (*Work of the Holy Spirit*). Similarly, Randy Maddox calls the Holy Spirit "the presence of responsible grace" and an "empowering presence" (*Responsible Grace*). Baptism reveals God's grace by water and the Spirit. Albert Outler summarizes how Wesley joined saving grace with sacramental grace: "The Christian Life, in Wesley's view, is empowered by the energy of grace: prevenient, saving, sanctifying, sacramental" (*John Wesley).*

Wesley's *A Treatise on Baptism*

Let us examine specifically what Wesley has to say about the sacrament in *A Treatise on Baptism.* Wesley defines baptism as "the initiatory sacrament, which enters us into covenant with God. It was instituted by Christ, who alone has power to institute a proper sacrament, a sign, a seal, pledge, and means of grace,

perpetually obligatory of all Christians" (*Treatise on Baptism*). Baptism, as a sign and means of grace, initiates a person into a covenant with God in which he or she partakes of *five* basic benefits.

The first benefit is "the washing away the guilt of original sin, by the application of the merits of Christ's death." Wesley applied this to all in Adam, including infants. The inconsistency in this claim is that, elsewhere, Wesley attributed the removal of guilt from original sin to prevenient grace as an unconditional benefit (*Letter to John Mason*). Maddox also speculates that when Wesley omits the notion of original guilt as "damning" from Samuel Wesley's original work on baptism, Wesley was contending that the guilt "was universally cancelled at birth by Prevenient Grace" (*Reasonable Grace*). Likewise, Collins points out that for Wesley the "soteriological significance" of infant baptism "was diminished somewhat by his understanding of prevenient grace" that removes the penalty of eternal death for original sin (*Theology of John Wesley*). The removal of guilt as an unconditional benefit of the atonement indicates two things. First, baptism is not (juridically) essential for infant salvation, nor did Wesley insist on it necessarily for adult conversion. He cites the example of an unbaptized regenerated Quaker (*Journal*, Oct. 16, 1756). One can have salvation without baptism (the thief on the cross). Second, our representation in Christ extends greater grace through universal atonement over against the universal condemnation in Adam. Although the punishment of death is passed on to all through the disobedience of one man, the obedience of one righteous man brought righteousness and life to all (Rom. 5:18).

The second benefit is what Wesley called the New Testament circumcision: baptism brings one into covenant with God. For Wesley, this New Testament covenant is one in which God promises to "give them a new heart and a new spirit, to sprinkle clean water upon them." Baptism is, in his words, "only a figure" of the reality of inward renewal" (*Treatise*). Here Wesley is making a distinction between the "renewal of the heart," which is an inward work of the Spirit, and "baptism," which is a "figure" that points to inner renewal. In other words, baptism is an outward sign of an inward reality.

The third and fourth benefits confer admission into the Church, or membership in the body of Christ, and adoption into the family of God for those born of water and of the Spirit. Again, Wesley makes a distinction between the outward sign (water)

and the inward grace (Spirit). In this way, Wesley often uses the term "baptism" in two senses. The first sense is pejorative, the *mere* outward sign of the water, which alone is ineffective. The second is the proper sense, according to which baptism is the sacrament that joins the outward sign of water with the inward grace of the Spirit. Wesley illustrates, "By water then, as a means, the water of baptism, we are regenerated or born again; whence it is called by the Apostle, 'the washing of regeneration.' Our Church therefore ascribes no greater virtue to baptism than Christ himself has done. Nor does she ascribe it to the outward washing, but to the inward grace, which, added thereto, makes it a sacrament. Herein a principle of grace is infused, which will not be wholly taken away, unless we quench the Holy Spirit of God by long-continued wickedness" (*Treatise*).

Baptism vs. The New Birth?

Wesley maintained throughout his ministry the importance and normativity of baptism and its need to be linked with regeneration. The sacrament proper contains both the outward sign and the inward grace, and thus, only in this sense is regeneration connected with baptism, not as an outward sign alone. He did *not* equate the outward and the inward; neither did the Church of England. In his sermon "The New Birth," the language is unequivocal:

> First, it follows, that baptism is not the new birth: They are not one and the same thing. Many indeed seem to imagine that they are just the same; at least, they speak as if they thought so . . . Certainly it is not by any within these kingdoms, whether of the established Church, or dissenting from it. The judgment of the latter is clearly declared in their large Catechism: -Q. "What are the parts of a sacrament? A. the parts of a sacrament are two: The one an outward and sensible sign; the other, an inward and spiritual grace, thereby signified. -Q What is baptism? A. Baptism is a sacrament, wherein Christ hath ordained the washing with water, to be a sign and seal of regeneration by his Spirit." Here it is manifest, baptism, the sign, is spoken of as distinct from regeneration, the thing signified.

Wesley continues,

> "[T]he new birth is not the same thing with baptism: They do not constantly go together. A man may possibly be "born of water," and yet not be "born of the Spirit." There may sometimes be the outward sign, where there is not the inward grace. I do not speak with regard to infants: It is certain our Church supposes that all who are baptized in their infancy are at the same time born again; and it is allowed that the whole office for the Baptism of Infants proceeds upon this supposition" ("The New Birth").

Wesley consistently affirmed this distinction between the new birth and adult baptism.

He acknowledged that infant baptism, as an initiatory sacrament, was the "ordinary way" one was initiated in Christ and regenerating grace. Yet, as an initiatory work, infant baptism was not a seal that *completed* regeneration or salvation. Wesley observed that many baptized as infants *sinned away* their baptismal grace, like he did at ten years of age, and needed the new birth. Although baptized as an infant, Wesley came to the place where he needed to be born again in order to enter into the kingdom of God. Wesley responds to the one who relies strictly on his or her infant baptism, "Lean no more on the staff of that broken reed, that ye were born again in baptism. Who denies that ye were then made children of God, and heirs of the kingdom of heaven? But not withstanding this, ye are now children of the devil." Wesley encountered many who claimed baptism in word but denied it by their deeds, and did not have the marks of new birth, which are "power over outward sin," faith, hope, and love ("The New Birth" and "Marks of the New Birth"). The fruit of the Spirit, rather than water alone, signifies the true mark of regeneration.

The need for the new birth in one's latter years does not dismiss or negate the initial grace at infant baptism, and neither does infant baptism negate that later in life one must be born again. What is initiated in infant baptism needs to grow as the child develops morally and matures into adulthood. The untested face temptation and usually fall into inward and even outward sin at some point (see UMC, *Water and the Spirit)*. Repentance, faith, and regenerating grace are then needed. This seeming incongruence of infant baptism and the new birth in Wesley has been theorized differently by many.

Maddox, in regard to falling away, would say that Wesley "did not attribute the cause to insufficiency of baptismal grace but to their neglect of that grace" (*Responsible Grace*). I concur. God's grace at every stage, from prevenient to repenting to regenerating and sanctifying, prepares us for more grace. Grace upon grace coincides with our spiritual development. An infant is not ready for convincing grace, as one newly regenerated usually is not ready for entire sanctification. Grace normatively is intended, given, and works alongside our cognitive, moral, and spiritual development to invite our participatory response.

Wesley exhorts, "Stir up the spark of grace which is now in you, and he will give you more grace" ("Working Out Your Own Salvation"). Baptismal grace, as initiatory, is just what an infant needs at that stage. Baptismal grace is not insufficient or an inferior grace but with development requires our participatory response, or it can be lost. Wesley continues, "So that no man sins because he has not the grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath… But for him that hath not, - that does not improve the grace already given,- shall be taken away what he assuredly hath" ("Working Out").

Regenerating grace does not guarantee one will go on to perfection. Continual growth in grace is essential. For this reason, Wesley established the means of grace: instituted (i.e. prayer), prudential (i.e. class and band meetings), and general (i.e. self-denial) to disciple, nurture, encourage, and exhort the faithful to go on to perfection. On the upward continuum of grace, the purpose of the work of baptism is to be joined with the new birth, and the purpose of the new birth is entire sanctification, holiness ("The New Birth").

What Happened?

Wesley clearly held the sacramental and evangelical aspects of baptism in tension. Why was his conjunctive notion of the sacrament not sustained in the Methodist church in the United States? Early American Methodism, led often by laity in class meetings, had limited access to elders to minister the sacraments in the fledgling nation. The rapid evangelization of the emerging frontier emphasized the dynamic of conversion over the institutional sacrament. As a result of these and other factors, the significance of baptism diminished. Institutional Methodism would be influenced by theological liberalism and positivist anthropology. Many embraced a

low view of sin and a high view of natural moral development. The need for conversion was minimized, thus draining the sacramental water of its spiritual efficacy. In many cases, the baptismal covenant and rite were reduced to a cultural christening, an infant rite of passage, a dedication, or an initiation into the institutional church apart from any expectancy of spiritual transformation. Methodism possessed the form of sacrament but denied its power.

On the other hand, from the evangelical current would arise the Wesleyan Holiness movement with its emphasis on entire sanctification. With the Arminian influence of human response to free grace, focus shifted to the crises of conversion and sanctification. The "new measures" of revivalism and the camp meetings became the holiness means of grace, replacing the relevance of baptism. A Baptist influence on the movement redefined baptism, for many, in terms of a divine ordinance that commanded obedience from human agency. The two threads of baptism, the evangelical and the sacramental, became unraveled. A way forward may be to rejoin the *form* with the *power*, the outward with the inward, the water with the Spirit, and the wineskins with the wine. In the sacrament, what God has joined together in water and the Spirit must not be divided.

Those who stand on their water baptism but do not move on to regenerating and sanctifying grace need to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, those who stress the evangelical vigor of the new birth and diminish the sacrament may need to reclaim the meaning of their baptism. The water represents regeneration. The letter of the water is dead, as the body without the Spirit. We need the Holy Spirit. Yet our experience of the Spirit is not meant to be a sensational self-serving experience disconnected from the theology and practices of the church, which ultimately point to Christ and not ourselves.

Reclaiming the robust dynamism of Wesley's conjunctive notion of baptism is needed if we are to retrieve the transformational DNA of early Methodism for today. We need both the water *and* the Spirit, both baptism and the new birth. We cannot properly "remember our baptism" if we deny it with our actions. A mere Lutheran remembrance or recalling of the water will not suffice. As Felton reminds us, "baptism could not function as a source of assurance as it did for Luther. In Wesleyan theology to 'remember one's baptism' might well mean to recall what one had lost rather than to be reassured of a present state of grace" (*The Gift of Water*).

An effective baptismal renewal can only occur if remembrance calls us to repent and be restored in the power of the Spirit. Our baptism then becomes continually renewed when we walk out the consequences of the new birth and are led by the Spirit into holiness and growth in grace.

In a Wesleyan theology of baptism, it is essential that the sacrament is understood in catechesis and praxis as water *and* Spirit because it is the Spirit that vivifies the sacrament for God's restorative mission, which is a new creation transformed in the image of God in Christ. The ancient liturgy of the church reminds us of the apostolic practice of water baptism and the laying on of hands (with oil) for the anointing of the Spirit, a true Spirit baptism (Acts 2:38). I believe that a sound and thorough catechesis in Methodist baptismal theology and liturgy could ignite a renewal of the Spirit in our sacramental life.

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